

8th Commandment

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[0 : 01] Of all the commandments, perhaps the one that we will be considering this evening, you shall not steal, is the one that most enjoys a universal consensus across nations, across religions, those who believe in God, those who do not believe in God, who would quibble with this as a reasonable prohibition, you shall not steal.

Who would contest that to steal is to do that which is wrong? And even if those who for philosophical reasons would be reluctant even to use the language of right and wrong, they would certainly recognize that it is unhelpful, that it is something that causes difficulties in society and in human relationships.

We've all agreed that it is not a good thing to steal. And yet, in one form or another, it is so common.

It is something that is done so often and by so many. I wonder why that is. Why is it that while we would intellectually, and I suspect even a thief would recognize that to steal is not a good thing, certainly if somebody were to steal from him, he would be less than happy and would protest at having been the victim of theft.

Why is it that it is so common, given that we would all be agreed that it is and should be forbidden? St. Augustine famously reflected on his own sinful adolescent heart as he remembered a childhood escapade of stealing pears.

[1 : 51] And if you will indulge me and bear with me, I'll just read a few sentences from where he remembers that occasion of being guilty of theft.

I wanted to carry out an act of theft and did so, driven by no kind of need other than my inner lack of any sense of or feeling for justice.

Wickedness filled me. I stole something that I had in plenty and of much better quality. My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing, but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong.

There was a pear tree near our vineyard, laden with fruit, though attractive in neither color nor taste. To shake the fruit off the tree and carry off the pears, I and a gang of naughty adolescents set off late at night after we had continued our game in the streets.

We carried off a huge load of pears, but they were not for our feasts, but merely to throw to the pigs. Even if we ate a few, nevertheless are pleasurely in doing what was not allowed.

[3 : 11] Here is one who recognized that he was guilty of stealing and very interestingly analyzes why he did it. He didn't need the pears. He didn't like the pears. He didn't like the flavor of the pears.

But the excitement, the thrill of doing what was wrong, indeed of consuming that which had been stolen. Perhaps we too are guilty of a similar fascination with that which is forbidden, that which is not ours, that which belongs to someone else.

Well, this evening we want to consider this commandment. We find it, of course, in Exodus chapter 20 and in verse 15. It hardly requires that we read the passage or read the verse.

It is only a handful of words. But there in Exodus chapter 20 and verse 15 we have the eighth commandment. Now, as we would consider this commandment, I want to do so in the following way, covering, perhaps very fleetingly, the following ground.

First of all, to consider some fundamentals that underpin the commandment. Some fundamentals that we need to understand in order to appreciate why there is this commandment and how there can be this commandment.

[4 : 39] So, first of all, some fundamentals. But then secondly, to consider manners in which we can break the commandment. And under this umbrella of manners or ways in which the commandment can be broken, it would be possible to go in a whole host of directions and examples of how the commandment can be broken.

And we will have to be selective and, I hope, a helpful selection that would paint a picture of different ways in which we can be guilty of breaking the commandment.

And then finally, and very briefly, a word on what to do if we find that we are indeed guilty of breaking this particular commandment.

First of all, then, some fundamentals to consider, to establish that will help us to understand better the commandment itself.

The first fundamental truth that is necessary to highlight in this regard is that everything belongs to God. Everything belongs to God.

[5 : 52] Now, this is a truth that is made clear in so many occasions and in so many ways in God's Word. And we limit ourselves only to reading one verse from one of the Psalms.

In Psalm 89 and verse 11, how does the psalmist address God? The heavens are yours and yours also the earth. You founded the world and all that is in it.

The psalmist rightly recognized that the earth is Lord's and the fullness thereof. Everything in it, everything in a fundamental way, belongs to God.

That's a first fundamental. But a second fundamental is that God has chosen to grant stewardship to man, to man generically, to man as a race, the human race.

God grants stewardship, indeed in a measure, ownership. First of all, let's just notice how He does so to man generically, man as a race, the human race.

[7 : 03] We've read in Genesis chapter 1, the creation account, and we've noticed how that chapter closes. We read there in verse 28, God blessed the man and the woman that He had created and said to them, be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves in the ground.

And then we read, then God said, I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.

I give you. God grants to man stewardship and, indeed, in a very real sense, ownership of that which He has created.

So, yes, God is owner of all, but He, making use of His own prerogative, grants or delegates, stewardship and, indeed, ownership of it in a secondary way to man in that generic sense.

But also there is a sense in which God has granted to nations that which belongs to them. Remember the occasion when Paul was preaching to the Athenians.

[8 : 27] We considered it a few weeks or perhaps months ago now, I can't remember. But in Acts chapter 17 and verse 26, remember what Paul stated there.

From one man, He made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth. And He determined the time set for them and the exact places where they should live.

God granting to nations a territory over which they have dominion. God is the owner of all the nations, but He, in a secondary fashion, grants to nations that which belongs to them, if you wish.

But then also, and perhaps more practically or of more immediate application to ourselves, God grants to us as individuals, as families, ownership of that which He gives to us.

We own goods and property and we are given that ownership by God. The examples of this are, of course, multiple.

[9 : 35] Perhaps one vivid example that we have is in Acts chapter 5, where we have that occasion when the disciples were giving very generously to the Lord's cause.

And there was one particular couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who didn't want to be left behind in this tide of generosity. But they were reluctant to give everything that they had from the sale of a property.

And so, you know the story well. They sold their property and they gave part of it, but they claimed to have given it all. And it is made very clear there by the apostles in rebuking them.

You had the property, it was yours. You were free to do with it as you pleased. You were under no obligation to give the money to the apostles, to us. It was your money.

It was your property. And very clearly it is established, not established, but confirmed, the right of individuals, of families to own property and goods and resources.

[10 : 46] So, these are some fundamental truths. First of all, that God is the owner of all, but that He has decided to give to man, generically, to the nations, and also to individuals and families, the stewardship and indeed ownership of that which is fundamentally His.

But in a secondary way, we can also be considered owners. To summarize, we come to the conclusion that it is a divinely instituted right to own property, the right to private property, to use the term that is sometimes used.

Now, having established that, and only having established that, can we make sense of the commandment, you shall not steal. Before we do just move on to the commandment, it is worth just noting in the passing what the Bible presents to us as the means whereby we, particularly as individuals or as families, can secure property, can secure goods that we are the owners of and have rights over.

However, the Bible really presents two means, two legitimate means whereby we can own goods, property, resources of one kind or another.

One legitimate means if we are given them. It may be by inheritance, or it may be by the generosity of another who chooses to give us something, and we receive.

[12 : 19] That is a legitimate way. But perhaps more fundamentally, the Bible presents work as the means whereby we become the owners of a house, of a car, of whatever you choose to mention.

We work. Our work produces for us an income, and we can invest that income in buying those things that belong to us. These are the legitimate means provided by God, whereby He gives to us that which is His.

So, what is stealing? What is it that God in this commandment forbids? You shall not steal. Well, to steal is to take unauthorized possession of that which does not belong to us.

We've noticed that there are legitimate ways of taking possession of perhaps things that we need or even want. But to steal is to take unauthorized possession. It involves violating this God-given right to private property.

Something belongs to somebody else, and we take it from them. In an unauthorized way, we steal it. It's not ours. We have no right to it. It belonged to somebody else.

[13 : 33] But we take it. We steal it. We are violating what God has established. Indeed, we are attempting, rather foolishly, but attempting to deny God's right to distribute what is His in the manner that He sees fit.

Some justify stealing by saying, well, I'm very poor, and this person is very rich. Well, there may be reasons for that, but we have to recognize that God has determined that.

It's true that somebody may be rich by a legitimate means, but that is another matter. God has ordered the manner in which we can secure what we secure.

And to steal is to say, well, we don't agree with God. We will see to distribute the goods that belong to God in the way that we see fit. So, to steal, then, is to take unauthorized possession of what does not belong to us.

That sets the scene, I hope, with regard to this commandment, and that allows us to move on, to consider some manner, some ways in which we can be guilty of breaking this commandment.

[14 : 41] And we will focus in, in a moment, on ourselves as individuals. But before we do that, let's just comment on man genetically and on the nations.

We've already noticed how God, the owner of all, has delegated stewardship and, indeed, ownership at different levels, to man as a race, to the nations, and also to individuals.

First of all, the delegation that God has made to man, generically, over the earth, the stewardship that we have been commended over creation, to care for and to pass on that which we have received to coming generations.

How can we be guilty of stealing in that context as a race? Given that what God has given us is intended to provide not only for our generation, but for subsequent generations.

If we are guilty of a greedy and irresponsible and wantonly destructive exploitation of the earth resources, that, I think, could reasonably be considered as an act of stealing from future generations.

[16 : 07] Now, let's be clear. What we've read in Genesis is very clear. As men and women, we are intended to exploit, in the proper sense of that word, the resources of this earth.

They have been given to us as food, as sustenance of one kind or another. And it is right that we should exploit the resources, be it mineral resources or other resources.

They are there for our benefit. That is good. But if we exploit them in such a way, I repeat, that we would deny irresponsibly and destructively that others might benefit from and have that which they need subsequently, there is a sense in which there we are guilty of stealing from those who would follow after us.

No doubt much could be said in developing that, but we have to move on. What about nations? What about nations? Nations have been given by God their territories, that which is their own, their borders, that which is within their borders belongs to them.

So, as God has appointed, how things should be. Well, clearly, if as nations we violate those borders that God has established by violent and uninvited invasion of other nations and a taking, a sacking of their resources for ourselves, then we are guilty as a nation of theft, of stealing.

[17 : 36] And we are part of a nation that has a less than proud record in this regard. But even if we move on from colonial times to our own day, is it not the case that a more subtle form of national theft would be the way in which between the powerful and the weak nations, between the rich and the poor nations, there can be unjust and exploitative terms of trade that effectively result in the powerful, stealing from the weak and the poor.

Now, these are complex matters, and it's dangerous to make blanket statements or accusations, but at least I would invite you to consider how in these ways, as nations, we can be guilty of breaking this commandment.

Indeed, as we think of an individual nation, we've already commented on how, as the human race, we have a responsibility for subsequent generations. What about within an individual nation?

We are currently living in interesting times. I think, is it the Chinese that have a proverb, deliver me from interesting times, or something along those lines. We were living in interesting times where we have a huge debt that has accumulated.

And there's a very real sense in which our generation have made use of what previous generations have saved, and have stolen from what subsequent generations will need to produce in order to cover our conspicuous consumption and luxury.

[19 : 12] We have mortgaged the future of our children and grandchildren to finance the lifestyles that we have become accustomed to. Others will pick up the bill.

We, in a small measure, are now beginning to pick up the bill. But others who will follow us will also have that onerous responsibility. Well, we move on to what perhaps is a more immediate application, though what we've said thus far, I hope, is at least suggestive of further lines of inquiry.

But what about ourselves as individuals? How can we individually be guilty of breaking this commandment? Let me subdivide three areas in which we can be guilty of stealing, of doing that which is forbidden here in the commandments by God.

First of all, by stealing from others. Direct theft. We don't need to dwell on that. Taking something that isn't mine from somebody else. In that way, we can break the commandment.

We can think of Augustine's pears. He climbed over the wall to his neighbor's orchard, and he stole the pears of the tree that did not belong to him. And there are, of course, millions of ways in which we can directly break the commandment by stealing.

[20 : 38] Stealing from others. There are other, maybe less obvious, indirect forms of theft. And here again, the examples are so many, we simply have to limit ourselves to one or two as illustrative of many others.

Perhaps one or two where we could be guilty of and somehow feel this is okay, this is legitimate. For example, when somebody has provided a service for us.

Maybe a tradesman who has done some electrical work or plumbing work in our home, and the bill comes to us. And we say, oh, well, I won't just pay it quite yet.

I'm a bit tight at the moment. I'll let it pass a week or two weeks or a month. I'm sure there'll be no problem. And we deliberately delay payment for services we have already received.

We have money that effectively belongs to the plumber. He's done the work. He may have charged five times what we thought was reasonable, but that's a completely another matter. He has done the work for us.

[21 : 36] We had an agreement. We have money that belongs to him. And we say, well, I'm not going to pay him yet. Companies do it all the time. It helps cash flow. And they work out the bottom line by delaying payment.

We can make more profit. We can do better. But as individuals, we can be guilty of breaking this commandment in that way. Perhaps when we're selling something. Most of us aren't in the business of selling.

We don't have businesses or shops. We're not in that line of work. But we all, at one time or another, may sell a car or maybe a house or some good that we have.

If we mislead in the offering of our goods. If we present this car as being in perfect conditions when we know that it isn't. And in that way, lead the person who is interested in the purchase to imagine that what they're getting is something other than it is.

In order to secure a better price. Then there is a very real sense in which we are taking from that person something that is not ours. We would be due to get a thousand pounds for the car.

[22 : 42] But we actually get fifteen hundred pounds. The car isn't worth that. But we manage to deceive the buyer. And so take an extra amount that doesn't belong to us.

So we can steal from others. And I'm sure we could, I'm sure all of you could think of many other examples. But another area, general area, where we can be guilty of breaking this commandment is in regard to our employer.

Those of us who have an employer. Those of us who have an employer are ordinarily contracted to work a certain amount of time. Now if we do less than the time that we have been contracted for.

If we arrive late and go home early on a regular basis and never make up the time. Then we are effectively stealing from our employer. Or even if we're physically present but are slothful in the manner in which we work.

So we're there. We get in on time. We're there on time and we stay until the appointed hour. But in the hours that we're meant to be working we're doing other things.

[23 : 46] Or simply not working at a reasonable pace. Then there is a sense in which we are guilty of stealing. We can steal also from the state.

From the government. Now many think this is okay. The government is fair game. A victimless crime to steal from the system.

Different ways in which we can do that. Some are very well known. Even in these past weeks there's been much made of benefit fraud. And a big crack down that there is.

On different areas of the benefit system. Incapacity payments is one obvious example that has been spoken of a great deal. Now no doubt any attempt to ensure that this system isn't abused is a reasonable one.

Clearly care has to be taken. That there aren't innocent victims of a crack down of this kind. But we know that many steal in this way.

[24 : 50] Take that which is not theirs. Which they are not due from the government. We might say well I wouldn't do that. That's not somewhere where I am.

But then we are all duty bound to pay our taxes. And there are taxes that we have to pay. And we can be guilty of when we are declaring our income.

Maybe it's a case of paying taxes. Or maybe it's to see if our children can have access to funding for education. Or tax credits. And you have to fill in the forms.

And you have to fill in all your income. From every source. And you say oh well I just won't bother mentioning this. This hardly counts. This is hardly irrelevant. We'll just leave that to one side.

And when we do that we are deceiving of course. But we are also stealing. If as a result we receive more than we are due. So in different ways we can be guilty of breaking this commandment.

[25 : 47] What should we do? Well before we move on to that. And we'll just mention it very fleetingly. There is one other very important general area. Fundamental area really.

In regard to this commandment. Where we can be guilty of stealing. And really with this we will close. And that is stealing from God. How can we be guilty?

How can I be guilty? How can you be guilty? Of stealing from God? Let me suggest four ways. First of all we can be guilty of stealing from God.

The honor that he is due. If I limit myself simply to reminding you. Of something we were looking at this morning.

We were considering there in Revelation chapter 19. The passage that speaks of the wedding banquet of the Lamb. And there was a part of the passage that we didn't deal with at all.

[26 : 42] Where the angel is addressing John. And John is so overwhelmed by all that he sees. And all that he is witness to.

That he bows down before the angel. And the angel rebukes John. The angel says don't do that. And why is he rebuked? Because John is giving to the angel honor.

That the angel is not you. The angel says I am just like you. I am not God. Worship God. Worship God. If you worship any other.

You are stealing from God. The honor that he is due. And the angel would have no part of it. In a sense it was John. Who was guilty. But the angel says if I say nothing.

Then I am also in a sense responsible. And so he very firmly exhorts John. To worship God and God alone.

[27 : 42] All false worship. Whatever shape or form that it takes. All idolatry. Whether it be in crude or in sophisticated forms. Constitutes a form of stealing from God.

Stealing from God. The honor that he is due. And who is able as we consider that truth. To say that we are wholly innocent.

So we can steal honor. But we can also steal money from God. That is of course the classic passage where reference is made. Where this very verb is used.

And I think we will be familiar with it. But let me just remind you in Malachi chapter 3. And in verses 6 to 10.

There of Malachi. We read there. I the Lord do not change. So you oh descendants of Jacob are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers.

[28 : 40] You have turned away from my decrees. And have not kept them. Return to me and I will return to you. Says the Lord Almighty. But you ask. How are we to return? Will a man rob God?

Yet you rob me. God here who is speaking. But you ask. How do we rob you? In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse. The whole nation of you.

Because you are robbing me. Bring the whole time. Into the storehouse. That there may be food in my house. Test me in this. Says the Lord Almighty. And see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven.

And pour out so much blessing. That you will not have room enough for it. Familiar though it is. It loses none of its relevance and power.

God himself. Very explicitly. Identifying. A manner in which we as his people. Can be guilty of robbing from him. By not giving to him.

[29 : 40] That which he is due. In the matter of our financial resources. Our tithes and offerings. Bring the full time. Into the storehouse.

Implicit that if you do not. Then you are guilty. Of robbing from God. So we can steal from God. The honor that he is due.

We can steal. In regard to the tithes and offerings. That he expects. From us. But we can also. Be guilty of stealing from God.

Time. That we ought to give to him. We have of course. One of the other commandments. That we have already considered. The commandment to honor the Sabbath day. There is an example.

Of one day in particular. That God has set aside. Whereby we might. In a particular way. Concentrate our attention. And dedicate our lives.

[30 : 36] And our service to him. And if we do not. Make use of that day. In that manner. Then we are stealing from God. But of course. All our time. Belongs to God.

All our time has been given to us. That we might serve God. And if we decide. To use our time. In other ways. If we are so busy. With our own preoccupations.

That we have no time. For God. No time for his word. No time for his service. Then we have to ask ourselves. Am I guilty of stealing. From God. Time that belongs to him.

God has given us also. Fourthly. Gifts that he would have us use. In his service. Very particularly. Spiritual gifts. We have natural abilities. Also that he has given us.

But very particularly. Spiritual gifts. That as Christians. We all have been given. We have been given to use. In his service. Indeed the reason he has given me. Or you a particular gift.

[31 : 31] Is because he knows. That that particular gift. Is required. For the building up. Of his people. And the. Fulfilling of the mission. And if we fail to use the gift.

In that way. Then we are. Short changing God. As it were. We are stealing from him. That which he has given us. To use. For.

His. Service. Different ways. And perhaps you could. I'm sure. Identify. Others. Finally. What to do.

What to do. As we would recognize. That in one way or another. In one measure or another. We are all guilty. What to do. Well.

It's not rocket science. When we recognize. That we. Are sinners. When we recognize. That we have sinned. In this particular. Regard. What are we to do.

[32 : 25] We are to repent. We are to repent. Of our sin. And if we. Are guilty. Of stealing. Then we are to steal. No more. We are to seek. And to secure.

The forgiveness. Available to all. Penitent. Sinners. We close. By listening. To what the apostle Paul. Has to say. In his letter.

To the church. In Ephesus. For evidently. There were those. Who had come. To embrace the gospel. From a life. Of crime. From a life. Of thieving.

And stealing. And what does he say to them. As he says to us. Let the thief. No longer steal. Yes you used to steal. Well don't steal anymore. But rather let him labor.

Doing honest work. With his own hands. So that he may have something. To share. With anyone. In need. Well that we would. Listen. To these words. And take them. To heart.

[33 : 19] Let us pray. Good.